



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5116**  
**First Broadcast February 3, 2008**

### WELCOME

**Daniel Pawlus:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad to have you with us for this half-hour reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Dr. Jacqui Lewis, Senior Minister of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. She’ll be talking to us about embracing the diversity in our faith traditions, as a way of rehearsing the reign of God.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We also welcome back Grace Imathiu, who recalls how, as child in Kenya, she learned a lesson about diversity from a wise Sunday School teacher.

**Lydia Talbot:** And we begin by meeting a woman who represents the face of religious diversity in America. Chicago is one of the most religiously diverse cities in America. We have a Hindu population of about 60,000 people, most of whom arrived from India as graduate students and professionals, starting in the late 1960s. Ramaa Krishnan, who was born in India and raised in Mumbai, arrived in the U.S. with her family in 1998. This is a look at her faith tradition.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Ramaa Krishnan:** I think the universal impulse is the need to move from fear to faith. I did my graduation in accounting and economics and then went on to get a CPA degree. I was getting ready to appear for the CPA examination and a family friend dropped by. She was on her way to meeting her spiritual teacher, so I went with her. Meeting him was the turning point in my life. He was the very embodiment of things that I had read and heard about, but never knew that there could be a person that I would meet in the flesh who radiated that inner peace. The moment I saw him I thought, “If he can do it, he can teach it.” I managed to secure another audience with him and on this occasion I told him I needed him to teach me. I said, “Please start me off on anything, any discipline that you feel that I should do and whatever you tell me to do, I will.”

He taught me to meditate but using a tool of sound, a mantra. Now, a mantra is simply a sound that you use to focus your mind upon. Every time you have a thought, you simply return to that sound. He gave me instructions on how to do it and how often, how long I should do it, the discipline of doing it everyday. It’s been 25 years almost to the day that I started meditation. I do it early in the morning. I wake up in the pre-dawn hours. It takes about one and a half to two hours.

[To meditation group] You are the ocean of awareness.

When I'm through I feel I have reinvented myself. We used to live in Bangkok, Thailand when we left India. And then we were informed we were expected to work in Chicago. The first six months were a nightmare. We ended up in a neighborhood where most people did not look like me. I did not know how to drive. I felt totally like a handicap. Some change had to happen. Over a period of time I realized that no learning is of any use to us unless it comes into practice in our day-to-day life. I began to realize that the key to living a more meaningful life is to have greater self-awareness and for this I decided I needed to have my own center for self-awareness. When you grow, it is to be able to face your fears. It's like gardening, you know. When we have weeds in the garden you're supposed to constantly remove the weeds and put seeds that will grow into beautiful flowers.

For me coming to America was a big gift because if I had not come here I would not have faced the fears that were in me. When you go out of your comfort zone and you go into an environment that needs you to be completely different, to do things completely different, that is when you look at your fears. And when you look at your fears that is when you have to call upon your faith to replace those fears. So it dawned upon me that it is not what you do that brings you happiness, it is how you do it.

[To group] Stay connected to the silence.

Maybe my whole life has been a big training so that I can come to this place that I can teach this thing. It just seems to me that this is what I'm supposed to do.

## TRANSITION

[Music]

## INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** For more information about Ramaa Krishnan and the Hindu faith, you can go to our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org). We're grateful to Ramaa for sharing her faith tradition with us. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

Dr. Jacqui Lewis is Senior Minister of Middle Collegiate Church, a multicultural, multiracial congregation in New York City's East Village. Jacqui thought about a call to ministry as early as seven-years-old at the Seventh Presbyterian Church in Chicago. She began her career at Eastman Kodak Company before entering Princeton Theological Seminary. Jacqui is the author of "You're So Wonderful," a book about the uniqueness of every child; and a new book, soon to be released, "The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leaders in Multiracial, Multicultural Congregations." We're delighted to introduce you to Jacqui Lewis. Welcome, Jacqui.

## MESSAGE

**Jacqui Lewis:** Daniel, thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

It is April 1968. I am nine years old and on a field trip to the nature center with my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class. I have a fairly healthy crush on Mr. Smith, our teacher. He leaves us at the picnic table

during our lunch break for a while and comes back crying. He tells us that Dr. King is dead, cut down by a sniper's bullet. My life is changed, our nation grieves. My tears are hot, but not as hot as the fires burning all over the nation that evening. Grief turns to anger in many hearts. I don't feel angry, but sad and convicted that I will help America live out the dream, the dream of a place where the content of one's character matters more than the color of one's skin.

It is April 2007. I am the pastor of a church in the East Village of New York City, Middle Church. Our worship celebration has us on our feet! With classical music; gospel and jazz; hymns; brass and cymbals; hand clapping and drumming all lift a joyful noise unto our God. There is something for just about everybody there. Baby Mabel is jumping in her daddy's arms. Ten-year-old Rebecca is singing at the top of her lungs. The gathered crowd is African American, Hispanic, Korean, Chinese and all Anglos from England to Australia. We speak English and Spanglish and Mandarin. One of our actors recites James Weldon Johnson's poem, *The Creation*, to the beat of Conga drums. In the poem, God looks at God's handiwork and delights in its goodness; we agree that it is very good!

It is sometime in the first century, fifty days after Passover and a huge crowd had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate a festival called Shavuot. Medes and Parthians and Pamphygians have all come to celebrate the giving of the Law to Israel on Mount Sinai. Children run ahead of their parents; teenagers are huddled in groups, some teasing, some flirting, some struggling to fit in. Older people are being helped along; some rest on pallets along the way. The crowd is devout and diverse; they speak Greek, and Hebrew and Arabic, among other languages. Some are very wealthy; others have saved a lifetime to make this journey.

And then suddenly, as we are told in Acts 2, there is a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. You can almost hear the wind in the Hebrew word *ruach*, the word for wind, for breath and for Spirit. And it was the coming of the Spirit that made the day miraculous. Just like the Law was given on Shavuot, the Spirit was given on Pentecost. The Spirit came much like a rush of wind, blowing through that diverse crowd, whispering to some, shouting to others. It seemed like tongues of fire had landed on everyone. Miraculous! But the truer miracle was one of communication and understanding. All of the people gathered heard the good news of God in their own cultural language. In their own language! The Egyptians, Cyrenes, and the Israelites; the elders heard the good news in a language they recognized and the young people heard it in their slang! Everybody heard the Gospel in a way that they could understand it. This was the birthday of the church, and the very first church was a culturally, racially, economically, and generationally diverse gathering of men and women, boys and girls who although incredibly different heard the same message of God's deeds of power.

The Spirit helped the disciples communicate in the languages of all those people. The disciples were multivocal. The disciples built a multivocal bridge of communication. The first church, the multivocal church, the Pentecost paradigm church was a cooperative, communal, celebrative church. Diversity meant joy and opportunity and surprise and creativity. In that Pentecost paradigm, the people of God were able to be on earth as they expected to be in heaven. They were, in other words, rehearsing the Reign of God!

That's what happens when the church welcomes and celebrates diversity. There is a sense of

having the not-yet-here right now, today. And every church, every community has diversity to embrace. It may be that there are different generations to celebrate. In some churches, the diversity is around worship style; some people like old hymns and others like praise music or gospel singing. Some churches are diverse around ethnicity, with people whose ancestors come from Germany or Africa or Ireland. Others are diverse around what a family looks like. But whatever the diversity God gives to us to embrace and celebrate, when we do it, we not only rehearse the reign of God, but we model for the world what it means to be the Beloved Community. We show in our celebration that each person, created in the image of God, helps the community to see more fully just who God is. I think that is really good news!!

Now, celebrating the uniqueness of all of God's creation is a really good thing, but it is hard work. Really hard work! That's why of the over 300,000 Christian congregations in America, only about 4% of them are intentionally multiracial and multi cultural. That's why David Chaves' congregational study shows us that 90% of us worship in congregations in which 90% of the people are just like us. That is why David McAlpern and his colleagues at Fuller Seminary suggested that monocultural churches were the best way to grow the church. Despite the work of so many good people in churches all over the country, 11:00 o'clock is still the most segregated hour in America.

It is work! But, if the church does not rehearse the Reign of God in our congregations, who will? If those of us who say we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength do not celebrate God's creation in all of its diversity, who will? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Segregation is the adultery of an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality." He meant that the Church has a moral imperative to create just, beloved communities of diversity. I think he was right.

If not us, who? If not now, when? Every time we embrace the other, every time we join together in our differences, we witness to God's goodness. We create what Brian Blount calls "pockets of resistance" in a world of fear and suspicion and division. The Reign of God breaks in as we rehearse it, one relationship at a time, one church at a time, one community at a time.

You may be thinking, OK, we can come together, but then what? Well, here are three things that we need to do when we come together:

We develop a border consciousness. Catholic priest Virgilio Elizondo helps me to think about life on the border, *en la frontera* in Spanish, conscious of what it means to be both/and. He's both Texan and Mexican. I am both African and American. Many of us are both privileged and not privileged. When we think of the ways we are both/and, we realize that we are "other" to someone else. The sense of our own otherness helps us to know what it is like to walk in the shoes of those who are disenfranchised or dismissed because of who they are. We build an empathy when we can ask: When did I feel left out? When did I feel power down? We sense in the other's suffering our own suffering, and together we are stronger. Our own sense of being the stranger helps us to welcome the other. We bear one another's burdens and they are lighter. A border consciousness builds empathy and that's what's necessary in diverse communities.

We need to learn some new languages. We need to become multivocal. We need to be conversant in the language of the other. We need to become culturally competent and multivocal.

We might need to learn Spanish in this country, or Mandarin, or even English. But I am not just talking about those kinds of languages. We need to learn the cultural language of the stranger in the midst of us. We need to learn the ways young people talk, listen to their music, read their magazines, watch MTV and BET. Be a student of their culture and listen and learn. We need to break bread together, so we can know each other's foods and rituals.

We need get deep, go naked and come clean. I wonder about how this might sound to you, but I really mean it. If we are going to be in diverse communities, if we are going to rehearse the reign of God, we need to come down off the surface and go deep. Get real, be honest, show ourselves and be willing to take the risk of being seen. Receive the other for who they are. Make a safe space for sharing, talking, listening and struggling. We need to confess together the ways fear and suspicion of difference shape our life in America. To undo those fears, we need to share our stories and listen to others, and let that sharing change us. We're transformed in relationships with each other, if we are open, and vulnerable and real. If we tell the truth, we can grow, fall down, fuss, get up, be changed and change the world!

The first church was a wonderful gathering of unique people, each filled with God's breath. Today, the church can witness to the magnificence of God's creation if we just go back to the beginning, our roots. The Spirit came, and everyone heard the good news in their own language. Our coming together in difference, our celebration of each other is a Spirit-filled miracle. We need that miracle. The world needs that miracle. Amen.

#### CONVERSATION

**Lydia Talbot:** If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Jacqui Lewis, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now let's talk again with Dr. Jacqui Lewis. Jacqui Lewis, you have ignited us! And I'm sure as you do every Sunday from the pulpit at Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan, with your authentic sense of joy that is so integral and central to your journey toward diversity. You not only talk the talk, but you walk the walk

**Jacqui Lewis:** Amen!

**Lydia Talbot:** And it's not just in church, it's in your beautiful interracial marriage with your wonderful husband, John. How have you seen minds change in that journey toward diversity?

**Jacqui Lewis:** I hope my dad won't be mad for sharing this story! It's pretty personal, but when John and I were dating we were friends. I think my father was uncomfortable about this bi-racial marriage. And over time, over the last three and a half years, four years, he has really come to love John. We just made this marvelous four-course Italian dinner last night for my parents. John and I are in the kitchen cooking and then enjoying it. My dad said to me, "You chose the most excellent man." So I think in time and through relationships, Lydia, we get to deconstruct what we think about race, what we think about difference, and we find out that we're much more alike than we are different.

**Lydia Talbot:** What a feast of celebration! Back in Chicago now, I might add, where you were seven years old in the Seventh Presbyterian Church.

**Daniel Pawlus:** That's right. You know, I'm fascinated, Jacqui, by how diversity has played a role in bringing you to the role of minister today because you were in the corporate world before.

**Jacqui Lewis:** That's right.

**Daniel Pawlus:** It seems like you've been blessed to experience diversity in faith communities. I wondered if you could talk about that a little bit, prior to where you've now landed and where you are at today at Middle Church.

**Jacqui Lewis:** Absolutely. As a child we were in the Air Force. My parents were in the Air Force, I guess. I wasn't, they were! But those churches, as you can imagine, reflected the diversity of Air Force communities and so they were not only interracial but they were interfaith. One Protestant church maybe and one Catholic church for people to worship in. And then all over the country with my work in Eastman Kodak Company. I lived in places like Philadelphia and San Francisco where diversity is built into the community and I sought out diverse worshiping communities. So to have the opportunity now to pastor this church, which to me really looks like the reign of God, is a privilege and an honor.

**Lydia Talbot:** Middle Collegiate Church is the oldest Protestant church in the country?

**Jacqui Lewis:** It is.

**Lydia Talbot:** 1628?

**Jacqui Lewis:** 1628. On top of a fort, on the waterside in New York City.

**Lydia Talbot:** But as you point out, Jacqui, America has the greatest religious diversity of any country in the world. But the Sunday morning worship service is still the most segregated hour of the week. What would you say to congregations sprinkled over the landscape of this country who are all white or all black or whatever, where there is very little sensibility about inclusiveness and diversity? Where's the start? Where do they start?

**Jacqui Lewis:** That's a really good question, Lydia. I would say that every congregation is diverse. We think we're alike, but you look around a congregation that might be, let's just say, almost all white. There would be Polish people and German people. And even worship style differences. Some people like really old songs and some people like the new modern things. Conversation, communication unleashes that way that we're different. And if we talk to one another, if we share with one another, we find out that the nuances that are there are things to be celebrated and encouraged. So rather than sort of squinting our eyes and thinking about how we're just the same, we can tease out that diversity and find the joy in that.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I feel like you're intimating that there is so much more to experience in a faith community if we're open to the diversity, whatever it may be within our faith community or congregation.

**Jacqui Lewis:** I think that's right, Daniel. One of the core, to me, theological pieces in all of Scripture is this way that we're all created in the image of God. And so if that's true, then to know more about God you need to know more about each other.

**Lydia Talbot:** It's like a child who recently said to me in talking about God, "I think that God has a little piece of everyone of us on him/her." Let me take you back to Manhattan here. Music, the arts, dance, it's all part of the excitement of worship. How has your wonderful church organist adapted to change and diversity?

**Jacqui Lewis:** Well, you know church organists can be something else and they often hold the tradition, but our organist, Jonathan Dudley, has been the most delightful experiment and has come along with us as we've made the changes along the way from his absolute, ardent love of classical music. He's now a person who has produced "Jesus Christ Superstar" at our church, the old rock musical, and he does a wonderful production of Quincy Jones' "The Soulful Messiah." So we're always trying to pull together, Lydia, old and new, rock and jazz, classical and traditional, because we, all of us, know God in diverse ways. That's part of the diversity. So Jonathan has been a wonderful partner and has come along way with me.

**Lydia Talbot:** We have to promote your new book, "The Power of Story."

**Daniel Pawlus:** Absolutely. I was going to ask that. You left us with some great challenges at the end of your message. How is the book going to address that? We've got about a minute left if you want to speak to that.

**Jacqui Lewis:** I think it's going to be a very practical help for not only clergy leaders, but also lay leaders and congregations. What I'm arguing in the book is that one way we get to tease out how we're different—and then discover also where we're alike—is through storytelling. Just like we're doing here: asking each other questions, having a holy curiosity about the other. And then as we seek each other out, we become community. So leaders will read this book and find out ways to do storytelling in leadership development, in preaching, and in education.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We look forward to reading it, Jacqui. Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Jacqui Lewis:** I'm so glad to be with you. Thank you for having me.

#### INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

**Daniel Lewis:** And now our friend, Grace Imathiu, a native of Kenya and pastor of Brown Deer United Methodist Church in Brown Deer, Wisconsin, brings us this "final thought" on diversity.

#### REFLECTION

**Grace Imathiu:** I grew up in a cookie-cutter village where everybody spoke the same language; had the same color of hair and eyes and skin. And although we had a few congregations, we were of the same religious denomination. Then a family moved into our village. Everything about them was different, from their language down to their clothes. And rumor had it their

eating habits were unusual.

I will forever be grateful to Beatrice my Sunday School teacher. She taught us about the gift of diversity we found ourselves in, by holding out her hand and saying, “You see, the fingers of my hand are different in shape and size. In the same way we are all fingers in God’s hand.” God’s world is a creation of different shapes, differing sizes, a whole lot of variety in tribes, color, culture and religion. Imagine if all I had were thumbs!

#### CLOSING REMARKS

**Lydia Talbot:** Thank you, Grace. And our thanks again to Dr. Jacqui Lewis, Ramaa Krishnan, and you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lydia Talbot.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today’s program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us here at “30 Good Minutes,” may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.